FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
July 21, 2002

AWESOME
John M. Buchanan

At its heart, I think, religion is mystical: Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of the Jordan. "I have seen things," Aquinas told a friend, "that make all my writings seem like straw." Religion as institution, as dogma, as social action — all of this comes later and in the long run maybe counts for less. Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky.

Frederick Buechner
The Alphabet of Grace

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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AWESOME
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Matthew 13:24-30
Genesis 20:10-19a

"Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!
. . . How awesome is this place!"
Genesis 28:16,17 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and into the silence of this time together, speak the word you have for each of us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the lingering concerns as our nation continues to deal with what happened to us last September 11 is the role of religion in the whole tragic business: the role religious beliefs played in the lives of the terrorists, Al Qaeda spokespersons' absolute certainty that God is on their side, determined, it seems, to create a worldwide conflict between Islam and Christianity. And on our side of it, claims by all sorts of self-appointed spokespersons that God clearly is partial to us, that God blesses America and nations who agree with us, that Islam and Islamic culture are backward, violent, oppressive, and worse.

Pondering all of that, *Time* magazine journalist Roger Rosenblatt, in a column "God Is Not on Our Side, or Yours . . . ," wades in with some pretty good amateur theology, observing that "no one knows what God is thinking about unless one is like Mohammed Atta, who had a pathological view of faith, or Jerry Falwell." A fanatic, Rosenblatt says, citing the familiar definition, "is a man that does what the Lord God would do if he knew all the facts in the case." Rosenblatt is a New Yorker, and on the topic of God's partiality, he wonders, "Where has God been since 1973 regarding the New York Knicks. I'd like to know"—an illusion that is even more tragic and theologically devastating to those of us who yearn for just a little vindication, a little redemption, a little justice, at Wrigley Field.

"There are folks like me" Rosenblatt says, "who are uncertain about what God is thinking. I believe in God all right. But I do not believe he is on our, or any side. The essential act of faith, it seems to me is *wonder*—a sort of involuntary fascination in *awe*."

And then he goes on to observe that "most religions make awe difficult, because they are concerned with ideology, uniformity, loyalty and favoritism—not the most useful tools for those who choose to live in mystery" (*Time*, 17 December 2001).

What an interesting thought, that the first and fundamental religious experience is not certainty that I am right, that I have the truth, that God is on my side, but awe, wonder, at the mystery and

beauty and glory of life, awe at the reality that is beyond me and my poor knowing. What an interesting thought that the first purpose of religion is to allow us to experience awe—not to remind ourselves that we are right and everyone else is wrong, but to confess the mystery, to talk about it and sing about it and express ourselves regarding the mystery, to remind one another when we forget—and we all do—that the word *God* itself is a three-letter construct for a reality that will not ultimately be defined by our words.

The fundamental religious experience is not certainty but awe. In fact, it may be the fundamental human experience. That thought was expressed in a very important book written 80 years ago by a German theologian, Rudolf Otto. His *The Idea of the Holy* is now a classic, required reading for all of us. In it, Otto called the basic experience common to all religions the "*Mysterium Tremendum*." He wrote

> the feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul. . . . It may become the hushed, trembling, speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible. (*The Idea of the Holy*, p. 14)

The dictionary defines awe as "profound and humble, fearful reverence inspired by something sacred or mysterious."

That's what religion should be about, but sometimes it is actually an impediment. One of my mentors, Professor Joseph Sittler, talked about it a lot and lamented that modern religion, modern churches, seem never to have heard of awe. In a treasure of a little book he wrote not long before he died, Sittler, who loved to play with words and did so beautifully, wrote

> Our general congregational life is so deeply sunk in a monodimensional and totally secularized culture as largely to have lost ear, eye, and heart for a word or deed that asserts a totally different possibility.

Sittler thought we Protestants are altogether too casual about worship. He was irritated by overly friendly worship, which he called "chatty spirituality" religion, which exudes confidence that it is no big deal to call on the name of the Lord, nor to presume to be in the divine presence. Sittler, a good, high church Lutheran who attended Roman Catholic Mass or a Greek Orthodox service every now and then for therapeutic reasons—to be reminded of mystery and the importance of awe—became apoplectic when he would visit a church and the minister, instead of calling the congregation into the awesome presence of the most high God of creation, began the liturgy with a "good morning," as if he were meeting them at the supermarket, and if the congregation did not respond energetically enough, repeated it, louder—"Good morning"—as if the worshipers were a collective of kindergartners not yet quite awake.

Modern church architecture drove Sittler crazy, about which he said, "Hundreds of bright new churches seem almost frantically to strive to provide a *Better Homes and Gardens* living room for the Lord God" (*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, p. 32).

Ironically, at the very moment popular, user-friendly religion is ridding itself of all vestiges of mystery and awe, the word itself is now used, or at least a form of the word, used and overused. "That's awesome," we say about almost anything that is better than average. So I went on a search this week and asked members of my family to help me track down the uses and reasons for the uses of *awesome!* And as is always the case, they came through with access to information I do not access, more information, actually, than I want. But having it, I feel honor-bound to share it.

A Google search—and, no, I didn't do it myself and have no idea what it is—turned up 3,780,000 uses of the word *awesome* on Internet sites:

Bob's Awesome Snacks
Awesome Clip Art for Kids
Awesome Food Recipes
Awesome Christian Sites
Awesome Barbie Dolls,
Awesome Ads, Jams, Beans, Scooters, Coffee
Awesome Blossom
Awesome Power of God Miracle News
and
BayWatch Awesome, for those who are interested

Another source patiently told me that "awesome" doesn't mean all that old stuff like mystery and wonder. When people say, "That's awesome," all they mean is "that's really pretty good, maybe even great." And then he let me know something he assured me that anyone over 40 would not know but most under 40 would, namely that Sean Penn, in a 1982 movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High,* playing a now legendary character named Jeff Spicoli, probably started the whole thing by saying "Totally awesome."

So now we all know more than we wanted to know.

The truth is someone said it a few thousand years ago. His name was Jacob, and one time he said "How awesome is this place. . . . Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it—awesome!"

His story is simply one of the best. You can find it in the book of Genesis, chapters 25-35, and it reads like a novel. One of the great discoveries of my adult life is that the Bible stories I heard as a child are great literature. Let me refresh your memory: Jacob is Isaac's son, Abraham and Sarah's grandson. He will be the father of Joseph. He is one of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. He was a twin, born immediately after his brother Esau. He was his mother Rebekah's favorite. Isaac preferred Esau, his firstborn, a hunter, a real outdoorsman. One time Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright, but the worst thing that happens, appalling actually, is that he and his mother conspire to deceive old Isaac, who is blind now, into giving the blessing—the transfer of authority and property—to Jacob, not Esau to whom it rightfully belongs as the

firstborn. Jacob and Rebekah, his mother, are very creative. Rebekah makes Isaac's favorite lamb stew and bakes fresh bread just like he loves it, dresses up Jacob in Esau's hunting clothes so he actually smells like his brother, puts lamb skin on his arms so he feels like Esau, and sends him in to his father, to impersonate his brother and ask for the blessing. It works. Isaac blesses Jacob. The blessing is irrevocable, by the way. And then Esau appears with his own lamb stew, expecting the blessing, and Isaac has to tell him that he's too late; he's been had—by his brother. Esau, needless to say, is inconsolable, then angry, and vows to kill Jacob, which would resolve the whole inheritance business not to mention his own rage. Rebekah warns Jacob and sends him away to her brother Laban's place to hide out.

And it is on that journey, the first night when Jacob, fleeing for his life, now a fugitive, cut off from his family, his home, his community, as guilty of treachery, dishonesty, betrayal, and greed as any man ever was, stops at the end of the day, lies down with his head on a rock, and falls asleep.

He's not praying, not in a temple, not thinking about anything much but his own survival, certainly not expecting to have a mystical, religious experience, but that is exactly what happens. He has a dream about angels ascending and descending a ladder and God speaking to Jacob, renewing the promise already made to Jacob's parents and grandparents.

> I will be with you.
> I will keep you wherever you go.
> I will bring you home.

Jacob awakes and looks around. It's all quiet. There is no one there but the rocks, the sand, the pale dawn light, the wind stirring. Did he imagine it? Did it really happen? I'll bet the hair on the back of his neck stood up and he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it. How awesome is this place!"

What's going on here? Well, for one thing, he just experienced a mystery that he couldn't explain. He just experienced a reality that is mysterious and unexplainable, a reality that commands his attention as nothing ever had.

For another thing, Jacob's intellectual assumptions are shattered. He assumes that God is in heaven or in a tabernacle, sanctuary, church. He assumes that his life, dreadful as it is at the moment, is of no interest to God, or if God is paying any attention to Jacob, he must be pretty angry.

Those are the same assumptions we make mostly, I think. We assume that God is basically understandable and on our side. But for the most part, we assume that God is remote, our lives are lived apart from God.

God can be contained in our theology, our worldview, our religion, and if God is paying any attention to us, it is in a judgment mode.

And so what happens to Jacob is a radically different experience of God. What happens to Jacob is radically good news, and the experience of it is awesome.

God is there. Even there in exile, as Jacob flees from danger, there in that "no place" out in the wilderness. God is there. "There is traffic between heaven and earth," someone put it. We are not alone. We live our lives in the presence of a reality larger than anything we can comprehend. And that reality, that God, will keep us and protect us and will be with us wherever we go.

The rest of Jacob's life was lived with that reality of God who was with him, who would never let him go, a God bigger than our religion, our theologies and ideologies, our liturgies and creeds, a God who comes to us in unexpected times and places, a God who, in the fullness of time, will come into human history in the most unexpected of ways—in the birth of a child in Bethlehem, in the life of a man who lived among us, in the death and resurrection of that man who makes good the ancient promise.

That is the news, the good news, to which we turn when our backs are to the wall.

"Where can I go from your spirit?" the psalmist asked.

> If I ascend to heaven, you are there
> If I am in hell—even a hell of my own making—you are there.
> Your right hand shall hold me fast.

That's what our faith is about ultimately: a God who appears in unlikely and unexpected ways, a God who shows up when we are running away from whatever it is we are trying to escape—our jobs, what our life has become, our parents, our marriage, our intimate relationships, our guilt, our own betrayals, our fears and anxieties. Our faith is about a God who comes into the messiness and secretiveness of our own lives and says, "I'm here. You are not alone. I will be with you and if you give me half a chance I will bring you home."

That is unexpectedly good news when you must say good-bye and commit a dear one to what you hope are loving hands; awesome good news when you're lost and can't find the way forward or home; awesome good news when nothing makes sense and life seems pointless.

Our faith is about a God who transcends our reason, our rational theologies and Christologies and ecclesiologies; a God determined never to let Jacob—you, me—determined never to let us go. And that is awesome.

T. S. Eliot wrote

> You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
> Or carry report. You are here to kneel.
> ("Little Gidding")

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it. How awesome is this place.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By John A. Cairns, Dean, Academy for Faith and Life

God of all the ages, you have spoken through priests and prophets. Wisdom writers have shared your word, and poets have sung your praises. History has been witness to your abundant mercy. Your grandeur surpasses all that we can know.

We thank you that in love you sent Jesus to walk among us and to teach us who you would have us be. He stooped to hear the plight of strangers and bent down to embrace the children. He suffered indignity and death on our behalf, and now he lives as our mediator, guide, and friend.

In response to Christ's friendship, we would be friends, O God, friends to those who are hurting today in physical and emotional ways. We pray for those awaiting tests and those whose tests proved positive. We pray for those who are undergoing treatment and those for whom no treatment can be offered. We pray for those who are helped by medication, for those who await a medication that will help, and for those who forget or refuse to take their medications. And we pray for all those who live with, worry about, care for, and cry over those who are sick. We earnestly ask for your healing presence in each of these lives, gracious God.

We pray as well for those who live in deprivation while we live with plenty. Especially today we lift up those who have lost their homes to warfare, who have lost their food supply to continued drought, who have lost their freedom to unjust imprisonment. Give us, O God, insight and political courage, so that we may stand with and for these brothers and sisters in ways that will make a difference for them and their world.

We would offer prayers for our world as well. Many of us are struggling because of the loss of investments and resources. Give us, we pray, eyes to see what truly matters. Many of us have lost faith in our corporate and political leaders. Give us, we pray, a clear sense of direction toward what is right. Many of us are saddened by the prejudice and innuendo that surrounds us and wounds others. Give us, we pray, the courage to stand with all of your children in the search for justice.

Take us by the hand, great God, and bring us to an awareness of your righteousness and a passion for your kingdom, that we—and all your children—may know ourselves to be one family. To that end—and in that hope—we are bold to pray as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father . . .